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USING POSITIVE PEER REPORTING TO IMPROVE THE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND ACCEPTANCE OF SOCIALLY ISOLATED ADOLESCENTS IN RESIDENTIAL CARE: A SYSTEMATIC REPLICATION

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We studied how rewarding youth in residential care for publicly reporting positive social behavior influenced the social interactions and acceptance of their most socially isolated peers. Results showed that the intervention resulted in substantial improvements in social interactions by the previously isolated peers. Peer acceptance ratings also improved for 2 of the target youths.

DESCRIPTORS: social isolation, social interactions, residential treatment setting, peers, peer mediation

Delinquent adolescents in group settings often reinforce the antisocial behavior of group members, and they rarely reinforce positive social behavior (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). However, a recent series of studies shows that rewarding antisocial adolescents in group care for reporting the positive social behavior of their peers (positive peer reporting, PPR) can increase the positive social behavior exhibited by those peers. The experimental evidence was obtained in classroom settings (Ervin, Miller, & Friman, 1996; Jones, Young, & Friman, in press), but a recent nonexperimental case report showed that PPR also improved the social interactions and acceptance of a socially rejected adolescent boy in a group-home setting (Bowers, McGinnis, Ervin, & Friman, 1999). This study is an attempt to experimentally replicate the results of that report with 4 adolescents in a group-home setting.

This study was conducted in partial fulfillment of the first author's PhD requirements at the University of Southern Mississippi. Frank Bowers is now with Grace University in Omaha, Nebraska. Partial support for the project was provided by a grant from the Carmel Hill Foundation to Patrick Friman. An expanded description of the methods, previous PPR research, and the Boys Town Program are available from him. Special thanks are extended to Christopher McGinnis, Annie Mitchell, Christine Pratt, and Rodney McNeal for assistance with the project.

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METHOD

Participants. Four Caucasian youths (Alisha, age 16 years; David and Homer, age 10; and Jeri, age 15) of normal intelligence,

placed at Boys Town as a result of high-rate antisocial behavior, participated. Boys Town uses the Teaching Family Model (TFM) wherein four to eight same-sex youths ranging in age from 9 to 18 years live with a highly trained married couple (i.e., Family Teachers) who use a standardized point system to teach and manage behavior. All youths meet nightly with their Family Teachers for a "family meeting" to review important events of the day (Coughlin & Shanahan, 1991). The participants lived in separate homes and were selected because their Family Teachers reported that they were socially rejected by all housemates.

Procedure. During intervention phases, participants were introduced to other youths in their homes as a Most Valuable Person (MVP). All youths were told that the name of the MVP was chosen via a weekly random drawing. During withdrawal conditions, nontarget youth (data were not collected on them) were chosen as MVPs to diminish attention to participants. During family meetings, Family Teachers informed the youths that they could earn points for reporting instances of positive social behavior exhibited by the MVP. The peer report point exchange was confined to the family meeting but the report could involve any behavior observed that day. Although the MVPs did not receive points, they were an audience to the report of their behavior and were praised accordingly by Family Teachers (for more detail, see Bowers et al., 1999; Ervin et al., 1996; Jones et al., in press).

Measurement. Observations were conducted in the participants' homes during 10 min of unstructured free time following the family meeting. During those times, the participants and their peer housemates were free to interact with each other in a centralized living area. Observations were conducted by doctoral-level psychology interns who had been trained during in-home practice observations. Participants' peer interactions were recorded as positive, negative, or involving no interaction using a 15-s partial-interval recording procedure (10 s to observe, 5 s to record). Negative interactions included unfriendly or uncooperative comments or gestures, and positive interactions included all others ranging from those that were obviously relationship building (e.g., sharing) to those that were more socially neutral (e.g., answering a question). At the beginning and end of the study, all youths in the four homes rated how much they liked to work and play with each of their housemates using an 8-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Data on interobserver agreement were collected on 45%, 44%, 24%, and 26% of observation sessions distributed across experimental conditions for Alisha, David, Homer, and Jeri, respectively. Total agreement for occurrences of positive, negative, and no interaction was calculated by dividing the number of agreements plus disagreements on an interval-by-interval basis and multiplying by 100%, yielding the following results: Alisha, 89%; David, 89%; Homer, 91%; and Jeri, 86%. Following initial implementation, procedural integrity checks were randomly conducted for 35% of the treatment days. Integrity checks were conducted by the first author using a behavior-specific checklist that assessed the extent to which Family Teachers praised the target youths, awarded points to reporting youths, and prominently displayed the name of the MVP. After the 1st day of intervention, procedural integrity was 100% across all four homes.

Design. PPR was evaluated for 3 of the 4 participants using an ABAB multiple baseline across participants design and a separate ABAB design for Alisha.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows an overall increase in positive social activity, indicated by decreases in

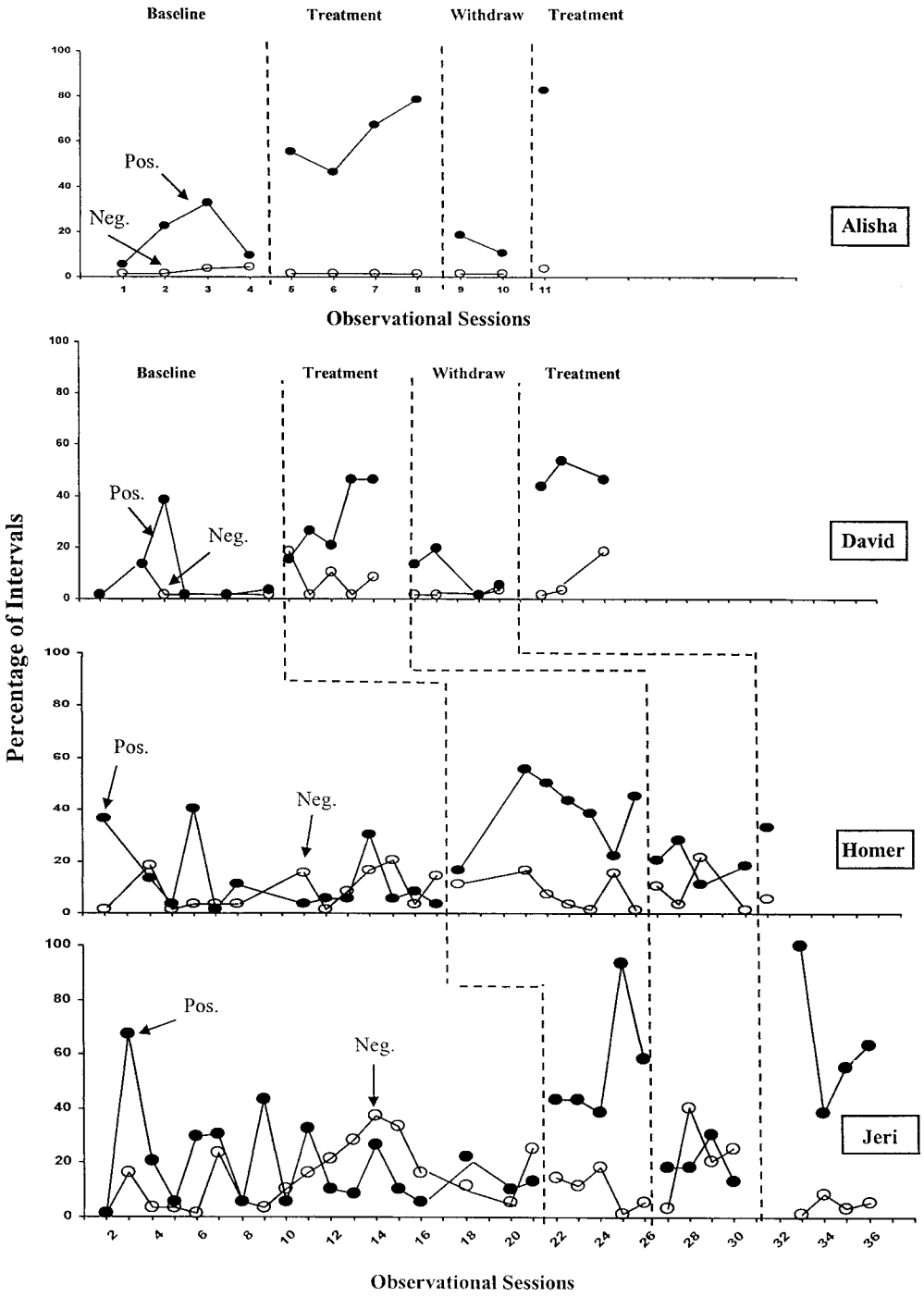

Figure 1. Positive, negative, and no interactions across conditions and participants.

intervals with no interactions and increases in intervals with positive interactions across all participants. There was modest evidence of a decrease in negative interactions for Jeri, no evidence of change for Homer and Alisha, and slight evidence of an increase for

David. Social acceptance ratings at baseline showed that each participant was the least preferred play and work mate in their respective homes and that ratings improved for David (2.7 to 3.7 for work, 3.0 to 3.7 for play) and Jeri (2.7 to 4.0 for work, 3.0 to 5.0 for play). Although there were no changes in overall ratings for Alisha or Homer, Alisha's relative standing within the home improved from sixth to fourth.

These results extend the literature on PPR by providing experimental evidence that this classroom-based procedure can also be used successfully in family-style group homes for antisocial adolescents. Also noteworthy is that in previous PPR studies, baseline intervals included a majority with negative interactions. In the current study, both negative and positive interactions occurred at relatively low levels in baseline. Thus, PPR may be effective both for youth whose social problems include excesses (e.g., interruptions, insults) and those whose problems include deficits (e.g., withdrawal, avoidance).

There are some limitations of this study (and PPR research in general) to consider. For example, no data on who initiates interactions, target youth or peer, have been reported. In addition, PPR has been evaluated only under highly structured conditions and during brief observation periods. Whether these results would be maintained, or could even be produced, in less structured settings over longer time periods is unknown. Finally, neither component analyses nor comparisons of PPR to other interventions for improving social relations have been provided, and both are needed to advance this line of research.

These limitations notwithstanding, the results of this study are important because social interaction problems are so prevalent among youths in residential programs and PPR is so readily incorporated into the TFM technology. In addition, recent influential papers have expressed skepticism about whether delinquents in group settings can or will exert a positive social influence on their peers (Dishion et al., 1999). Perhaps data of the sort described here, showing that programming peer-mediated contingencies to favor positive social behavior can promote a positive social influence in settings in which antisocial influences often flourish, could help to reduce this skepticism.

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